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The Monarch Who Declared His Own Revolution

King Abdullah, 85, is racing to reform Saudi Arabia. How much can he accomplish—and will it last?

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The night of September 11, 2001, had come and gone in Saudi Arabia, and the dawn prayers had been said in Jidda. But at midmorning, when a visitor to Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdel Aziz al-Saud found him in one of the vast rooms of his palace, the de facto ruler of the country was still bent on the floor. "He was alone," remembers the visitor, insisting on anonymity. "He prayed long, long, long—much longer than I have ever seen." At last the man who is now the king of Saudi Arabia (he would inherit the throne in 2005) arose and spoke. He seemed stunned. "I am sure our good people did not do these things," he said. Yet word had already come from the United States that most of the 19 hijackers were Saudi citizens. "He could not put this within a context that he understood," recalls the visitor. "Not in an Arab context or a Muslim context or a Saudi context." In the years since, when Abdullah has talked of Al Qaeda and its allies, he uses words that translate as "the deviant group," or "the miscreants," as if it is impossible that they could have been his subjects.

For years the pace of reform in Saudi Arabia has reflected what seemed to be denial. Change has been almost imperceptibly slow, like a dune moving across the desert, even as the kingdom's festering problems nourished extremism. In the past few weeks, however, things have suddenly accelerated as the king has moved to show the ultraconservative Saudi religious establishment quite literally who's boss. He sacked the head of the feared religious police and the minister of justice, appointed Nora al-Fayez as deputy education minister, making her the highest-ranking female official in the country's history, and moved to equalize the education of women and men under the direction of a favored son-in-law who has been preparing for years to modernize the nation's school system. "Abdullah waited," says Robert Lacey, who wrote "The Kingdom," the classic 1981 study of Saudi Arabia, and is now working on a sequel. "He bided his time until it was appropriate for him to make the changes he wanted." Whatever the reason, the 85-year-old monarch has begun acting like a leader whose vision is becoming clear just as time is running short.

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2009 MAR 30 PM 4:30

The question is how much he can accomplish before his death or dotage. Physically and mentally, Abdullah is still going strong, says Ford Fraker, the outgoing U.S. ambassador to Riyadh. "The physical power of this man is remarkable," Fraker says. "When you shake hands with him it's like shaking hands with a tree trunk. He is rock solid. There isn't a tremor anywhere." But he'll need every bit of strength and stamina he can muster. Transforming Saudi society may be a task as overwhelming as that of creating Middle East peace. There are just as many factions hoping the king's efforts will fail, and just as much hard, incremental, unglamorous work to make sure the reforms stick. Can Abdullah follow through? And will the next king continue those reforms or undo them? Abdullah's father, King Abdel Aziz ibn Saud, had more than 50 sons by various wives, and not all the half-brothers-in-waiting have the present king's cool wisdom—like Interior Minister Nayef, 76, who publicly suggested in 2002 that "Jews" might have been behind the 9/11 attacks.

To say that Abdullah believes in simple values—those of the Arabs, of Islam and of the House of Saud, as he sees them—is not at all to say he is a simple man. His life has bridged centuries of change. Born into the crumbling palaces of desert tribes in 1923 (the precise date was not recorded), he now rules one of the richest countries on earth. When Abdullah was a child, his father had not yet finished his conquests on the Arabian Peninsula or founded the nation-state that bears the family name.

The boy was 6 when his mother died, and as her only son he felt he had to take care of his younger sisters even then. "He had a tough childhood," says Abdullah's daughter Princess Adelah. "He took on a lot of responsibility from the time he was very young." The children grew up amid rebellion and insurrection, with their father's rule threatened by the intolerant Wahhabi Brotherhood that had helped bring him to power.

As a grown man, Abdullah witnessed the oil boom and the corrosive effects of spectacular greed—and more fanaticism, more insurrection, including the bloody siege of the Great Mosque in Mecca in 1979. There were dangerous intrigues within the family, too. When Abdel Aziz died in 1953, the succession passed to his son Saud, who was deposed in 1964 by his half-brother Faisal, who was murdered years later by a nephew. When Fahd took the crown in 1982, Abdullah became crown prince, and after Fahd suffered a stroke in 1995, he became acting king.

He brought a powerful sense of desert tradition to the job. His mother was from the powerful Shammar tribe that extends from Saudi territory deep into Iraq, Syria and Jordan, and before being named crown prince he had been head of the Saudi National Guard, a force made up of tribal levies from all over the country. He was immersed in Bedouin culture—the same traditional Saudi values that frame the world as Abdullah sees it. "You do not see him being more lenient with his family than with the National Guard," Princess Adelah told NEWSWEEK. "He is very straightforward, very honest, and hates injustice." Ambassador Fraker sees him as "someone who in many ways is a throwback to that desert-warrior ethos where men stand by their word, they look each other straight in the eye and they apply a code of honor." Fraker recalls Abdullah talking about his

fellow leaders in the region and asking, "Are there men of honor in the Middle East?" The answer, for the most part: "No."

According to Saudis who have watched the king's foreign-policy initiatives up close, he holds little trust in his counterparts. "He is suspicious of everyone, and believes they are evil until proven innocent," says one analyst who is close enough to the palace to prefer not to be named talking out of school. After the king finally came to terms with his subjects' involvement in 9/11, his attitude toward the terrorists was that they had betrayed everything in which he believed.

That sense of betrayal continues to drive him. Former CIA director Michael Hayden has credited the king and his men with providing some of the most productive and effective cooperation that the United States has with any country in the world. "Aggressive efforts by the Saudi security forces between 2003 and 2006 led to the death or capture of most Al Qaeda leaders and operatives within the kingdom," Hayden told a think tank late last year. "Financing networks were disrupted. The Saudi Interior Ministry undertook what is perhaps the world's most effective counterradicalization programs." Hayden added: "I am struck, maybe even surprised ... by the degree of emotion in my Islamic counterpart's voice when he is talking about Al Qaeda and how un-Islamic Al Qaeda really is."

Abdullah essentially looks on his subjects with paternal indulgence, and his affection is reciprocated by much of the population. But such a personalized relationship between king and people provides an uncertain foundation for some of the reforms Abdullah now wants to push through. Speech is freer than ever before, but dissidents still risk being thrown in jail for speaking out publicly. Book fairs and poetry festivals have become gathering places for men and women, but they're also what one British expatriate in Riyadh calls "battlefields" where young hard-liners express outrage at the distribution of popular romances. The king has made history by meeting with the pope (after demanding and getting the acquiescence of Saudi Arabia's religious authorities), but Christian churches are still forbidden on Arabia's sacred soil.

Women are still forbidden to drive. They're required to keep their bodies covered (though they may expose their face if they like), and their choices in every aspect of life, personal and professional, are more limited than those of men. Saudi law treats women, at best, as second-class citizens. The fiery Princess Adelah, playing an ever more assertive role, is an inspiration to some. "She listens," says a young mother of two girls. "The king likes her a lot. She has become his public face."

And the old man himself? "I met him once," the mother says. "He's very quiet. I was with a delegation. We all shook hands with him." In puritanical Saudi Arabia, that's a serious gesture in itself. "He said we were all his daughters. And he actually listened and tried to solve each one's problem: 'Talk to this person or that person!'" Still, change like that is hardly systemic. "Look, I would like to have a more effective role for women in society," says Adelah, who presides over numerous Saudi charities and whose husband, Faisal bin Abdullah, is the new minister of education. "We are finding it hard. We find lots of

resistance. But we will not give up. These things aren't given to you. You need to pull them out of society."

Whatever you do, don't make King Abdullah angry. In 2001 and 2002 he threatened to rethink the U.S.-Saudi strategic partnership if Washington did not do something to stop the suffering of the Palestinians under Israeli occupation. In short order, George W. Bush became the first American president to openly advocate the creation of a viable Palestinian state. When Bush started to backpedal on diplomatic efforts to realize that goal, Abdullah visited the Crawford ranch and reportedly delivered an angry ultimatum; Bush's then secretary of state, Colin Powell, was later quoted as calling it a "near-death experience."

Nevertheless, the king prefers honorable conciliation over confrontation. In 2002 he tried to end the Arab-Israeli conflict by imposing a deal on the Arab League that would offer peace between Israel and all of the Arab world if Israel would pull back to its 1967 borders, allow East Jerusalem to become the Palestinian capital and make some accommodation with Arab refugees from the wars of 1948 and 1967. The plan won't stay on the table forever, he warned during the recent Israeli bombing of Gaza.

But the violence and threats continue on all sides despite his best efforts. Fighting between Hamas and Fatah is said to cause him particular anguish. Abdullah's foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, recalls the king's reaction during an especially ugly moment, back in 2007: "He just couldn't believe that Palestinian guns were turned against Palestinian people, and blood is shed and people are killed and children are orphaned while they're facing such horrendous treatment from the Israelis. He just couldn't take that."

The king is likewise distressed by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's popularity on the Arab street. The Iranian president keeps gleefully stirring up trouble in the region, apparently oblivious to the harm he does with his encouragement of extremists, with his venomous posturing toward Israel and with the nuclear program he's revealing bit by bit, like a bomb hidden behind seven veils. "Don't play with fire," Abdullah warned Ahmadinejad when they met face to face in early 2007. The Saudis have quietly worked to undermine Iranian influence in Lebanon and even in Syria, Tehran's old ally. "The Iranians cannot match us financially, so why not give it a try?" said a Saudi analyst who asked not to be cited by name because of the sensitivities involved.

But Abdullah's reforms at home—if they succeed—could be as significant as any of his foreign-policy efforts. Those domestic moves are likely to take months or years before they produce solid results. "The king's heart is in the right place, but he's up against an intransigent bureaucracy," says one senior Western diplomat who has worked with him closely. "There were times when we agreed on something with the king and six months later we would raise it again. He'd say, 'We agreed, and it was done.' And we'd have to say, 'But Your Majesty, it wasn't done'."

Most Saudis seem to revere their king, and many appreciate what he's trying to do. Still, they're not sure that even he has what it takes to transform their reactionary society. "I am afraid it's not enough," says the young mother in Riyadh. "And in a year or two, it might be—nothing." For Abdullah, for the Americans and for the Saudis themselves, that would be a tragedy.

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